

THE ABORTIVE ESTIMATE CONCERNING THE CZECHOSLOVAK COUP OF FEBRUARY, 1948

On February 25, 1948, President Benes of Czechoslovakia yielded under pressure to Communist demands that he accept a Communist cabinet and join the Soviet alliance. This coup d'etat in a country traditionally friendly to the West caused widespread consternation in the United States and Western Europe and played a part in stiffening or weakening the resistance of various countries to Soviet encroachment. (see No. )

That Czechoslovakia came under Soviet domination at this time should have surprised no one who had been observing events in Eastern Europe since the war. The apparent suddenness of the event, however, created a certain amount of shock. It would undoubtedly have been useful for the United States government to have had advance information that a coup was impending. A warning delivered by Central Intelligence would have brought credit to the Agency.

Failure to give warning might have been ascribed to insufficient intelligence or the youthfulness of the Agency. An estimate declaring that there would not be a coup might have had the effect of impairing confidence in the Agency. As it actually happened, Central Intelligence wrote the paper which might have contained the warning but misinterpreted the evidence and discounted the coup. For reasons unrelated to the event, however, this paper was never disseminated.

In the files of Central Intelligence estimates 1946-1950, there is a folder marked "ORE-60 (cancelled)".<sup>1</sup> There is nothing left of this paper, which was to have been called "The Current Situation in

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Czechoslovakia", except a carbon copy of one draft. Written on this draft is the note: "Rec'd ORE/EG Dec. 12." This must have been 1947--two months before the coup.

The reason why this paper was in an early stage of production in December and still in unfinished form in February lay primarily in failure to get agreement within the Office of Reports and Estimates. Also--as was ironically often true--work on this particular project was impeded by the demands of other work, undoubtedly less essential than that on Czechoslovakia, but at the moment seeming more urgent. "ORE-60" had just been brought to the point where it was considered ready for inter-agency coordination when the coup occurred. After that, even if its analysis had been accurate, this paper could have had no further value.

The draft that remains began by pointing out that Czechoslovakia was the only European country on the borders of the USSR still to be communized. It noted that the proximity of Soviet power was in itself sufficient to exert an enormous pressure on the Czechs. It stated that the Communists were the strongest single political party in Czechoslovakia and that Communists held important cabinet posts, including those of Premier and minister of secret police. The Communists, it said, were well organized and extremely aggressive. The paper not only perceived that a coup was a distinct possibility, but it gave reasons for believing that the Kremlin itself might desire such a move at that particular time. All in all, it can be gathered from the paper that the Communists, for numerous reasons, might well consider that an opportunity for seizing

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1. See Historical Files, case #2465

power had arrived so promising that it might never be repeated.

Having brought the reader to this point, the paper proceeded to a contrary argument based, in the first instance, on such generalizations as the "independence of the Czech national character," and Czechoslovakia's "western traditions". A considerable recent increase in Czechoslovak Communist activity was noted, but instead of relating it to possible preparation for a coup, the authors took it to be a "trial balloon" having to do with the national elections to be held in May. The Communists' first objective, according to the paper, was to win these elections legitimately. Failing to do so, they might, of course, resort to violence, although reasons were given to suppose they probably would not. The paper also observed that the Party was steadily losing members, the point being used, however, to underscore alleged Communist weaknesses. The authors of the estimate apparently ignored the possibility that this very fact might be among others prompting the Communists to seize the reins of government before they lost their following, lost the elections, and finally lost their opportunity altogether.

The reasoning above, however, was only contributory to the principal argument which follows:

"It appears unlikely at the present time that the Kremlin will order an early Communist coup. The risk involved outweighs the immediate advantage to be gained. Such a coup, in addition to endangering Czechoslovakia's important economic contributions to the USSR, would probably necessitate the use of Soviet troops to rescue the Communists.

This, the USSR is not yet ready to do in view of possible UN action..."

In other words, the local situation was analyzed, not from the point of view of what might seem locally plausible, but from the standpoint of how the Soviet Politburo was supposed to be fitting the area in question into its grand strategy.

It needs hardly to be pointed out that no blueprint of the grand strategy of the Kremlin was in the hands of Central Intelligence in 1947.

The authors of "ORE-60", in other words, relied primarily on the method known colloquially as "G-2ing the Kremlin." Starting from the assumption that the USSR wished to avoid general war (which was supported by official intelligence estimates) and from a second assumption that the Czech Communists proceeded only on orders from Moscow, they further assumed that intervention by Soviet troops might be necessitated if Czech Communists attempted violence; that military intervention would risk war; that therefore the Kremlin would permit no moves which might necessitate the use of troops. Similarly, an assertion was made about the Czech economic contribution to Soviet Russia which was unexplained and unsubstantiated. In short, from the view of the Kremlin, as seen through the eyes of American intelligence analysts, a coup in Czechoslovakia as of early 1948 would be a dangerous and self-defeating enterprise. It is evident that this reasoning so impressed them that they tended to undervalue more immediate factors (also within the purview of the Kremlin) which argued the likelihood of a coup.

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This reliance on broad generalizations unsupported by direct intelligence, at the expense of narrower reasoning more directly supported by evidence, is mentioned here because this was one of the early instances of the method. The same may be seen three years later in various estimates regarding Chinese Communist intervention in Korea (see Paper No. ).